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PALESTRINA, PIUS, AND PLAIN-SONG *

The evolution of Plain-Song from pre-Christian times, with special reference to the late edict of Pius X, and its probable effect upon the musical life of the Church, covers an almost overwhelming avalanche of historical events which can only be very briefly (and in a reprehensively sketchy manner) brought to your remembrance.

"A good life hath but few days," and digging into the past is like listening for yesterday's echo, apt to make a man a dull dog. Frankly, I should rather be branded with the odium of originality than crushed with the curse of chronology, but *nolens volens* (and with many forebodings for your comfort) I must ask you to hurry back with me through the dead centuries; over the graves of the Druids and over the wreck of Rome; to the first dawn; to those early streaks when in its long garment lay the whole world; before the day when Phra the Phoenician crept between the Pillars of Hercules, "or ever the chimneys in Sion were hot."

Most carefully have I examined the historical claims made by the champions of so-called Gregorian music. With no little weariness of the flesh have I read all the arguments (and weighed the evidence) contained in the numerous publications of the Plain-Song and Mediæval Society, and the propaganda of the Gregorian Association. For a quarter of a century have I been on the fighting line of Gregory's army, and to-night I shall give you the result. But you say, "you are biased!" I think I am. Hear briefly the evidence, and decide.

As a singing boy, my earliest recollections happily revolve round a daily Gregorian service, which was all my musical life and very dear to me. From my youth up have I lived in the Gregorian atmosphere; sitting at the feet of the men whose names are writ large in the Gregorian galaxy. Then to Rome, the *alma mater* of the cult, where one bathes in it and loves its ruggedness, its antiquity, nay, its very ugliness, if you will, just as one loves

* From an address before the New York Church Club, 1905.

the yellow old Tiber and every gaping hole in the ruined Coliseum. All of which time my sympathies were entirely with it, while my reason cried out strongly against it.

Now for the subject:

Plain-Song—What is it? Who made it? Whence came it? Upon what grounds, ecclesiastical, historical, or logical, is it entitled to our consideration, and how is it adapted to our artistic needs to-day? There are eighteen definitions of the word, more or less pedantic and plausible, none of which I shall inflict upon you; for I alone have discovered what I believe to be the real inward meaning, which has hitherto escaped the notice of the most learned commentators. Like all really great discoveries, it is so simple that you will wonder why it was never thought of ages ago. Instead of consulting the *Magister Choralis*, Riemann and Naumann, and Finkel and Lambilotte; Helmore and Martini; Menestrier and Dom Pothier and the rest, I simply went to the dictionary under my nose, and Eureka! I found it! Plain-Song — double word. Plain — artless, homely. Song — that which is sung; a mere trifle; an object of derision. So that Plain-Song may be diagnosed in the vernacular as a homely object of derision. This squares with the quaint sentiment of Ambrose, who described it as a penance for the ear; a sort of flagellation of the flesh, made at a time when all beauty was supposed to emanate from the Evil One.

Whence came Plain-Song — this alleged holy music which its devotees (leaning with their elbows on the meat) protest is almost divine in its origin? They protest too much; for the more we search, the more we marvel at the matchless impudence of the claim, and we come to agree with the old college professor who said he never ceased to admire most in the human mind its stupendous capacity for resisting knowledge!

Now with the glory of Phinehas (the Son of Eleazar), who stood up with a good courage, I protest, and (protesting) challenge historic contradiction. This music came from and was an integral part of what? think you? — the drunken revels, held by the ancient Greeks, in the Dionysiac festivals in honor of Bacchus, the God of Wine! There is no possible room for doubt about it. The historical continuity is flawless. These Grecian festivals were

celebrated with choric dances. There was (at first) some kind of musical accompaniment, and (later) singing by the *choreutae* in hymns called dithyrambs, reciting the praises of Dionysus or the exploits of Bacchus, when fifty members of the chorus sang, performing round the altar to the deity the evolutions which constituted the cyclic dance.

In the sixth century before the Christian era, Thespis made a further innovation. Elevated upon the steps of the altar he interspersed the hymns with monologues of a dramatic character from which grew the cantata of the seventeenth century and the melodramas of the eighteenth century. This melodrama was spoken with musical accompaniment. Subsequent poets (among whom Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were pre-eminent) extended the form by introducing two (and afterwards three) persons in musical conversation, and thus obtained a greatly widened scope for the display of the emotions of each. In due time, the number of the chorus was reduced from fifty to fifteen, but their original choric dances (from whence etymologists derived their name) were never separated from their singing; and the orchestrics (or motions of the dance) gave the name of orchestra to that space in the theatre (below the stage) wherein the altar stood and the chorus preformed their hymns and evolutions.

Not only were these dithyrambs sung in chorus alternately by men and boys, but the monologues of Thespis and his pupil Phrynicus and the dialogues of the mature poets were chanted or intoned throughout accompanied on an instrument. The music was so far free, as to afford them the utmost power of impressive declamation. It was tuneful and rhythmical, and constructed upon the modes (says Macfarren) afterwards adopted in the Christian Church. My friends have curiously mistaken the heathen bacchanal of the rabble, for the holy light of Christian art. It has also occurred to the writer (though foreign to our subject) that the odd steps of a crucifer which one occasionally notices, may be a survival of these Bacchic feasts when the singers regulated their steps according to the halting rhythm of the dithyramb. This was so in the time of the Pharaohs. So much for the sacred origin of the unworthily historified grub

which was fore-ordained solely to eventuate into the beautiful butterfly music.

For though no fluttering fan be heard,
The Lord shall winnow the Lord's preferred.

Upon what is the whole fabric of plain-song built? What is its syllabarium? Of what primitive syllables is this Gregorian language made up? Its followers will tell you with bated breath, that it is founded upon the very earliest scales known to man and that it remains to-day exactly as it was thousands of years ago, and it is much to be revered therefor. "'Tis true, and pity 'tis, 'tis true."

Now as to the authenticity of these "holy" tones. The early history of plain-song is a wild goose chase in a land of impossible pot hooks and hangers; a study in indecipherable hieroglyphics. Nivers calls them "crows' feet;" Ambrose "nails and horse-shoes;" Guido d' Arezzo refers to them as "like drawing water out of a well without a rope, pursuing a shadow, and following after the wind." Nothing but signs, points, hooks, strokes, and flourishes to guide the voice. Out of these prosodiai grew the ecclesiastical pneumata or "pneuma;" "sound or breath," of which the reputed author was a monk of the fourth century, St. Ephraim.

Let us refer for correct information to the books issued under the imprimatur of the Plain-Song and Mediæval Society. Wyatt says guardedly, "the evidence of their authenticity is rather scarce" (he forgets to submit any). Helmore says we have little historical information as to it. From "Recent Researches in Plain-Song" I gather the only grounds for believing that we possess the original melodies must be something quite apart from the earliest documentary evidence. Boethius says: "Up to the eleventh century, there was no notation which expressed either the real music of the chant or the time in which it should be sung; the result has been endless confusion to the student.

Dr. Riemann (in "*Les Origines du chant liturgique*") says: "The traditions respecting Gregorians have of late been widely disturbed by Gevaert, who (for strong reasons) refuses to accept the role assigned to Gregory by tradition. The Ambrosian

chant is one of the most enigmatical chapters in the history of music, for we really know nothing about it."

Crely says that in the seventh century two hundred years after the Pontiff's death nothing certain was known of the music founded on the modes of Gregory, because the pneumata were only helps, and shewed not the actual music. It is impossible to say what the melodies based on the Ambrosian scales were like, because none have been preserved (or, at least, yet discovered).

Niedermeyer, founder of the School of Sacred Music of Paris, writing of the chant previous to Palestrina, speaks thus:

"Such anarchy, such total lack of foundation, of object, procedure, and unity! Tossed about between empiricism and absolutism, a veritable musical Babel of these pretended theorists of the past. Systems brought to light from the dust of libraries, old pedagogues who submit the ecclesiastical chant in a way indefinable, uncertain, variable, uncouth."

D'Ortigue (when about to write his "Dictionnaire du plain chant," not being quite clear himself as to the authenticity) called for essays from the authority, Danjon, and a still more widely known theorist. His summing up of the matter follows: "I am not, perhaps, justified in sharing their opinions, as not only did they not agree with me, but they did not even agree with each other."

Hear the Church. The Holy See has put out two authorized editions—in 1870 and 1904. They radically differ; neither do they agree with the use of Ratisbon, which differs from the Benedictine use at Solesmes; which differs from the liturgical use of Valfray (used in Paris); which differs from the use of Reims and Cambrai; which differs from the use of Rennes and of Digne!

All this evidence, mark you, is culled *verbatim et literatim* from the writings of professed Gregorianists who asseverate that authentic antiquity is the principal argument for the retention of these "clods of pitch, and heaps of ashes," of which "the flame is gone, and the smoke only remains". Believe me, they are nothing more in the divine progress than gnats and other annoying insects which, devoured by birds, are ultimately converted into the music of the thrush and winged choristers.

They tell us, quite forgetting that we are the descendants of Eve who preferred her husband to an angel, that we ought to love plain-song: (1) because of its simplicity; (2) because of its gravity; and (3) because of its beauty.

Well, let us see. Because of its "simplicity." First, the student must learn to distinguish the twenty-eight signs for the system!

In tracing back the early scales of various nations it is curious to discover how each nation gave characteristic nick-names to each note — *e. g.* the Chinese called their first scale "the law", and its five notes were called, (1) "emperor" (2) "prime minister" (3) "loyal subject" (4) "affairs of state" (5) "mirror of the world."

The first recorded scale of the Arabs had to do with implements for the nomad pitching and striking of tents — *e. g.* (1) "long rope" (2) "short rope" (3) "stake" (4) "peg".

But, back to the simplicity of this plain-song, and let me tell you (on the judgment of a man brought up in the thing) that merely to learn to sing these various neumes passably well would involve of an accomplished vocalist two years of constant study! Helmore says, "It is a common mistake to assume that the average choir can sing Gregorians well. They are much more difficult than ordinary music."

Upon inquiry at the Vatican what was the shortest time in which an earnest seminarian could acquire sufficient knowledge of the cantatas to sing properly all the ritual music of the Roman offices, I was told, with a weary smile, "perhaps in seven years" — the same length of time which Jacob served for Rachel, and then also found he had not got what he wanted. The antiphones alone of the melodies number over one thousand! and as to the correct use for each, well, you can take your choice of over fifty-seven varieties.

Now as to its beauty. Well, beauty is a matter of taste. You remember Lamb's enquiry when he was giving a dinner party, and not remembering a suitable grace, asked, Is there a clergyman present? and on receiving no reply ejaculated fervently, "Thank God." Don't misunderstand me, I beg of you. I have no sympathy with those cavillers who malign the clergy.

On the contrary, I do not believe they begin to do the harm they might.

Because of its "gravity." By far the greater part of the music is made up of ornamental grace notes, roulades and trills. They are to be sung very slowly, but there they are — *e. g.*, "The twenty-eighth sign, the quilisma [I quote Helmore] is a tremolo, vibration or shake. It must be executed with a vibratory voice like the sound of the horn or trumpet. The French singers," he adds, "in the time of Charlemagne had the greatest difficulty in the execution of this, for they, with their naturally rough voices, were unable to execute the graceful tremolo this sign required."

Saint Ambrose (374) was the first to join instruments of music with the voices in the public services of the Cathedral of Milan. He also introduced antiphonal singing, after the model of Basil, Bishop of Neo Cesarea, who had followed the custom in the east of Ignatius, who was appointed bishop of Antioch by the Apostles Peter and Paul. This you see traces antiphonal singing back to the time of Christ. Ambrose first arranged the four scales for ecclesiastical music and wrote hymns in the iambic dimeter. Here we have the egg from which evolved in due time the three dimensioned Gregorian bird. The Ambrosian hymn, "Te Deum," was not written until a hundred years after the death of its reputed author.

Two hundred years elapsed between Saints Ambrose and Gregory, during which (according to St. Isidore, Archbishop of Seville) the chants became greatly corrupted. Gregory the Great (540) is responsible, to my mind, for the devolution (going backwards) of church music. Originally a good man, he afterwards, however, became a lawyer; then monk; and eventually, Pope. All his life he suffered from gout (I always think of this when I hear his alleged music), and in the church of St. Peter, says John the Deacon (three hundred years later), are still shown the couch on which he reposed when giving his lessons, and the whip with which he impinged the Gregorian use upon the little singing boys.

There is not a scintilla of evidence that he composed any music. But he gathered round him in the *Schola Cantorum*,

which he founded, a staff of choirmasters who put together the notes which the Holy Father unconsciously cerebrated. Here we have the first recorded victim of this unhappy clerical ailment. Annexing all the tunes which met the æsthetical requirements of the artistic taste of the sixth century he collated them into a book, called the "Antiphones," which his disciple, John the Deacon, speaks of as a "Cento." ["Cento" I find to be a Low Latin word meaning "patchwork."] This codex or antiphonarium he chained up to the altar of St. Peter's. At first blush, this chaining up may seem to have been a humane action on the part of the original unconscious cerebrator; but (in the inexorable logic of facts) history has proved the contrary.

The founder of Gregorians is always connected in my psychologically irreverent mind with Mr. John Hetherington, also a benefactor, after his kind. It was Mr. John Hetherington, you know, who one hundred and more years ago, invented the silk hat; but instead of getting a halo (like Gregory), the records of the time tell us he was charged with a breach of the peace and inciting to riot by wearing a tall structure having a shiny lustre, calculated to frighten timid people.

History for one thousand years after Gregory is a recitation of constantly recurring attempts to escape from the thralldom of the old tortuous labyrinths of theology, and the measured malice of these fettered melodies. I cannot forget, and it makes me angry to remember, that (thanks to the ever watchful Roman divinity, the divinity "which doth shape our ends rough hew them how we will") in the sixteenth century, Christian music had only achieved one-half of what the other arts had accomplished. It made more progress in fifty years after Luther had hurled at the mass (in his usual hard hitting manner) the strenuous epithets, "antics of monkeys, braying of asses," than it had made in the one thousand previous years.

Pope after Pope has bulled; canon after canon has volleyed and thundered and straightway hoist those religious scarecrows heresy and schism at every attempt of persecuted music to find the haven where she would be. Why, people outgrew

Gregorians only two hundred years after Gregory's death! For we find Leo IV writing to the Abbot Honoratus in this episcopal manner: "There is something quite incredible, the sound of which has reached our ears; a thing which (if true) tends rather to diminish our consideration than to give it lustre. It appears, in short, that you feel nothing but aversion for the beautiful chant of St. Gregory, and for the manner of saying and reading taught by him, so that you are in disagreement with the Holy See;" and there follows the usual suggestion for retraction, under pain of excommunication.

The whip of Gregory the Great has successively given place to the Bulls of Leo IV, Hadrian I, John XXIII, Stephen X, Gregory XIII, Pius IV, V, IX, and X. All as infallibly impotent to stem the torrents of artistic progress, as was the command of Canute to the waves, "so far and no farther."

Passing on to the eleventh century — the era of the Gothic art in architecture, the era that gave birth to the "Divine Comedy" of Dante and the "Parzival" of Wolfram von Eschenbach, the era when music again attempted to free herself from her bonds—we come to Palestrina.

Palestrina was called in "to purge the Roman music of barbarisms by Gregory XIII after the Council of Trent which was called (as you know three hundred and fifty years ago) at the instigation of a handful of disagreeable people who thought "the music was becoming too attractive" and wanted to abolish all that was beautiful and return to the pedantic artificiality of plain chant. The famous Tridentine Council (all honour to it) decided that artistic music was not to be banished (and plain-song, *per se*, used to its exclusion. It is popularly and erroneously held that Palestrina composed a mass so beautiful that it led to the decision. As a matter of fact, Palestrina was not in evidence until after the Council's decreta.

Lacking the longevity of Methuselah, he did not live long enough to do much "purging"—which consisted largely of the expurgation of the words of secular ballads which (with a superfluity of naughtiness) had been interpolated in the mass—but he did live long enough to be dismissed by His Holiness, and also to publish masses in which the fundamental melodies were

borrowed from secular songs. He did not very materially alter the music, because neither he, nor you, nor anyone else could possibly tell what was original and what had been (from year to year) orally interpolated.

The recent bull of the present Pontiff (with a perverse constraint of logic or of sentimentality) is not only an egregious artistic blunder, but a veritable anomaly; for in one and the same breath, he asks for a return of the artistic music of the Palestrinian School, and a restoration of the plain chant as it was before Palestrina and his successors had purged it. The rest of the edict is only a replica of former equally ineffective bulls, and the Holy Father's condemnation of "vain repetitions" is no newer than the Sermon on the Mount.

Plain-Song is simply a landmark in the onward march of melody, for music (like the waves of the sea, advancing here, receding there) is ever moving on. The lozenged shaped neumes of the over-rated Saint Gregory bear the same affinity to the art of God-given music of the present year of grace, as the pot hooks and hangers of our youthful attempts at writing to the finished style of our developed years.

I have no patience with the melancholy meanderings of this Gregorian leviathan which has dragged its lugubrious length across the dead epochs of pagan and philistine progress with groanings that cannot be uttered, eternally mourning (like a pre-adamite turtle dove) the loss of its mates, the cetiosaurus and the dodo. I know it's unique. So is the three-toed horse of the miocene period, and the megatherium, and the bat with thumbs in its hind feet. Of what use are the spits that cooked for Chaucer? Must we commit parricide, because the Scythians ate their grandfathers? Are we bound to adopt for a three-day and three-night rest cure the floating sanitarium somewhat hastily selected by Jonah? As the witty editor of the *Sun* says, "The point of view changes. If Solomon were living now, pursuing the career with which his name is associated, he would have no standing in respectable society." Why struggle to perpetuate the nativity of Adam? Why parade these fossilized relics of Noah's Ark — these lame-gaited shadows; these Gregorian skeletons with disanimated members, grotesque, convoluted,

distorted, co-twisted ghosts that cannot forget they are ghosts — shades of all that is antiquated and untenable in the early gropings for light? I have been taught that animals alone are stationary and that man is progressive. How dare this coterie of fourth century carpers — these poets of a maimed lute — how dare they lay their little fingers upon the spokes of the Great Wheel, and pretend that the dark ages of art's blankest inanity (suited well enough the chaos of human mind untamed) is the Alpha and Omega of the Great Artist (I speak reverently), God? Rather, I would beg them of their charity to take us back farther; back to the dark, the utter dark; back to the long sleep before the winds were made; back to that oldest of all things, Silence!

Most of the Gregorian *raison d'être* rests on tradition, which (if followed up) proves to be myth, fairy story with an occasional sub-stratum of fact, which (if examined) proves, in nine cases out of ten, to have happened indeed, but to somebody or something else, quite foreign to the subject. While, of course, there is no intention of misstating legendary happenings, they are often given a *soi-disant* Gregorian coloring, which seductively leads to a wrong inference.

Names, whose sense we see not,
Fray us with the things that be not.

Time, the vehicle which carries everything into nothing, will eventually settle the Gregorian question. There is no doubt that the final estimate of beauty in music must always rest upon the evidence of the feelings, and our ears are attuned to more subtle sensations than our forbears wotted of. If Mathew Arnold is right, that "religion is morality touched by emotion," music must have a personal color, and men have striven for it ever since Jubal stumbled upon the gamut.

We are children of a different era than the age during which the Gregorian song was created. Art has emerged from its swaddling bands, a new and happier spirit has evolved, and the people's song has nothing now in common with the *cantus gregorianus*. With the advent of Luther (who was not so much anti-catholic, as a free interpreter of accepted dogma) the desire

arose to be no longer bound by the rites and ceremonies and mathematical music of a bygone generation. Thus the first Roman basilica, the chief feature of which was its prominent horizontal line, gradually became so altered as to be finally capped with towers, which, in their turn, were surmounted with the cross pointing heavenwards. Everything developed a growing upward tendency, preparing the way for the Gothic style. The sturdy old reformer, who not only played the organ, flute and lute, but sang tenor or alto and occasionally all the parts, where, as often happened, he was solo, chorus, and orchestra, dealt a crushing blow to church music in its archaic form. Under him it acquired a new and very distinctive protestant character; it became a living medium, and if we take the music of the day, and compare it with the productions of the Middle Ages, we recognize two different arts, poles asunder. Not only are the superstructures quite distinct, but the very foundations upon which they are erected are of a different nature and mutually exclusive of each other.

An analogous case may be seen in the study of architecture. What can be more dissimilar than Norman and advanced Gothic? Yet we know that the latter is a development of the former, and the gradual change from one to the other can be clearly traced through the transition period.

The material from which music is constructed is the scale. For any given composition this must be of a definite nature, *i.e.* the tones and semi-tones of which it is formed must be found in certain fixed places; they are as permanent and unvarying for the time being as a proposition in Euclid. The explanation of the difference in effect between ancient and modern music lies in the fact that they are constructed upon different foundations. The scales of ancient music are now obsolete, therefore it must follow that the music formed from them is (for all practical purposes) also obsolete.

This then is the logical conclusion of the whole matter. My last word is a word of warning. He who gave the music of the past gives also the music of the present. To refuse it, I should be false to my creed, falser to my trust, falsest to my art.

I dare not appear in the land of all music and say "Lord, here is thy one pound!" I dare not. Believe me, there are no hereditary claims in art, and, my masters, there is no clamor from the past — the graves are silent. Could the Holy Father, Gregory, and pious Ambrose appear before you to-night, they would say, "Benedicite, my children; we did what we could with the tools of our time. Go on, upward, with your larger knowledge, your harps and flutes, with all the glory of your enriched art; up to the blue sky with its lamps of stars, leaving us and our gropings to the blackness of the desert of death, and the grimness of the Pyramids."

Has earth's last picture been painted?
Are our tubes all twisted and dried?
Have our brightest colors all faded
Has the youngest critic died?

Nay!

Let us each for the joy of the working,
And each in his separate star,
Still draw the thing as we see it,
For the God of things as they are.

LACEY BAKER.

Calvary Church, New York City.

ADDENDUM

The appended letter in comment explains itself:

183 COLUMBIA HEIGHTS,
Brooklyn, June 21, 1905.

MY DEAR SIR:

I suppose I am indebted to you for a copy of the *Living Church*, containing an all-too-short synopsis of remarks made by you, before the N.Y. "Church Club," *in re* "Gregorian song."

I might close this letter here — by saying, "Amen, and Amen!" to your every word.

However, I wish to say a little more. I am truly delighted to find some one who has the courage (and common sense) to

stand up and tell the absolute truth. This more especially where an ecclesiastical "fad" probably prevails.

I have done some polemical writing in days gone by. It is now up to the younger men of America to do the same — Pope, or no Pope!

I think your article should be wider spread — in other papers, perhaps amplifying the same. Keep on — the modern world is certainly with you. We cannot go back to stage-coaches or horseback travel.

Very truly yours,

DUDLEY BUCK.

MR. LACEY BAKER.